

# Grave Matters: The Preservation of African-American Cemeteries



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African-American cemeteries are a unique resource. They not only represent the last resting place of black Americans, but are also storehouses of African-American history. The graveyards and the grave decorations offer an unusual glimpse of a part of history which is rapidly disappearing. The cultural customs of those using these cemeteries changing. In addition, African-American cemeteries are also being lost as a result of development pressures. Sometimes the locations of the cemeteries are not known. At other times the cemeteries look "abandoned" and "uncared" for. This booklet will help you to better understand the origins of African-American cemeteries, the beliefs of those who have used them, and why they are so important to our understanding of black culture. You can play a vital role in helping to preserve these cemeteries.

## ***What is the History of African-American Cemeteries?***

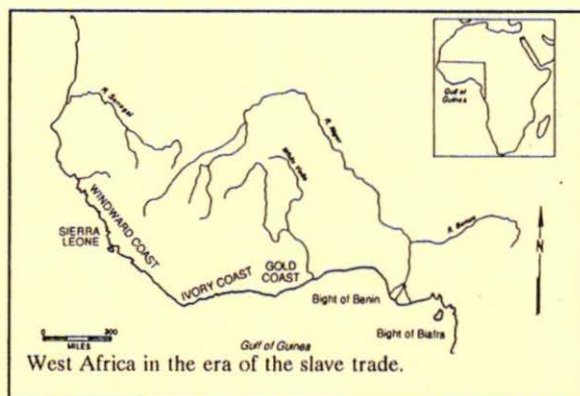
It might seem that a good place to begin our exploration of African-American cemeteries is in Africa. Understanding how African groups buried their dead might help us better understand the early development of African-American cemeteries here in the Southeast.

This is, unfortunately, much more difficult than you might imagine. Africa is a large continent with many different cultural groups. Many are poorly understood. The 10 to 20 million African-Americans forcefully transported as slaves to the shores of the United States came from a number of different cultures. Further complicating this approach is the interaction of different religious beliefs once the slaves arrived on the plantations — most planters were Christians, while some blacks were Moslems and many others held other religious beliefs.

One anthropologist, Margaret Washington Creel, has examined a range of African beliefs and religious practices in an effort to better understand slave religion. In her study, *"A Peculiar People": Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs*, she explores the beliefs of the BaKongo, Ovimbundu, and other groups on the Windward and Gold Coasts.



It is even more difficult to discover the religious beliefs of African-American slaves. Planters were rarely interested and often took steps to curb, or at least carefully monitor, the religious training and activities of their slaves. Very few planter diaries recount the events surrounding slave burials.



Yet we do know that these African-American slaves died by the thousands. One study, for example, found that the mortality rate of black children on the South Carolina and Georgia coastal rice plantations was astonishingly high — nearly 90% of all children died before they reached the age of 16 years. Even on more interior cotton plantations it is likely that nearly one out of every three slave children died before adulthood. Death was certainly a way of life for African-American slaves and they had ample opportunities to make the trip from slave settlement to cemetery for their friends and family.

Thomas Chaplin, a Sea Island cotton planter on St. Helena Island in Beaufort County, South Carolina, mentions the making or purchasing of coffins for black slaves on only two occasions. He describes only one African-American burial, on May 6, 1850:

Got Uncle Ben's [slave] Paul to make coffin for poor old Anthony. The body begins to smell very bad already, had it put in the coffin as soon as it came. Buried the body alongside of his son about 11 o'clock at night. . . . There were a large number of Negroes from all directions present, I suppose over two hundred.

At another nineteenth century South Carolina slave burial reported by Creel:

The coffin, a rough home-made affair, was placed upon a cart, which was drawn by an old Gray, and the multitudes formed in a line in the rear, marching two deep. The procession was something like a quarter of a mile long. Perhaps every fifteenth person down the line carried an uplifted torch. As the procession moved slowly toward "the lonesome graveyard" down by the side of the swamp, they sung the well-known hymn:

"When I can read my title clear  
To mansions in the skies,

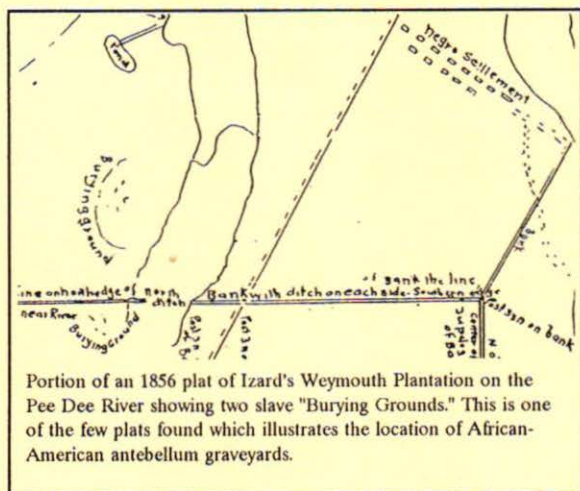
I bid farewell to every fear  
And wipe my weeping eyes."

... the corpse was lowered into the grave and covered, each person throwing a handful of dirt into the grave as a last farewell act of kindness to the dead. . . . A prayer was offered. . . This concluded the services at the grave.

Yet another slave burial, on Georgia's Butler Island, was described by Frances Anne Kemble in early 1839:

Yesterday evening the burial of the poor man Shadrack took place. . . just as the twilight was thickening into darkness I went with Mr. [Butler] to the cottage of one of the slaves . . . who was to perform the burial service. The coffin was laid on

trestles in front of the cooper's cottage, and a large assemblage of the people had gathered round, many of the men carrying pine-wood torches. . . the coffin being taken up, proceeded to the people's burial ground. . . . When the coffin was lowered the



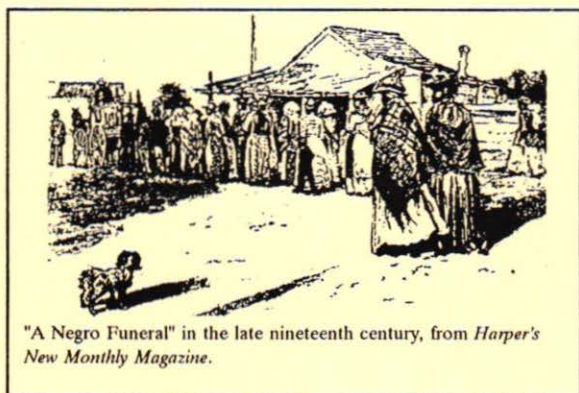
Portion of an 1856 plat of Izard's Weymouth Plantation on the Pee Dee River showing two slave "Burying Grounds." This is one of the few plats found which illustrates the location of African-American antebellum graveyards.

grave was found to be partially filled with water<sup>1</sup> — naturally enough, for the whole island is a mere swamp, off which the Altamaha is only kept from sweeping by the high dikes all round it. This seemed to shock and distress the people . . .

All of these slave burials are similar. They seem to have invariably taken

<sup>1</sup> The South Carolina State Museum's exhibition catalog, *The Last Miles of the Way: African-American Homecoming Traditions* illustrates a twentieth century funeral where the water table was within 18 inches of the ground level. Initial efforts to dip the water out of the grave were unsuccessful and the wood coffin was eventually lowered into the water.





place at night, possibly to allow slaves from neighboring plantations to attend, but just as likely because no other time was available. This may help explain why so many African-American burials continued to be held on Sundays even into the early twentieth century. All of the accounts suggest that the burials were rather significant affairs, with

prayers, singing, and sometimes even an air of a pageant. Sometimes the service was reported to continue until the morning. Many accounts from the mid- and late-nineteenth century reveal that African-Americans were uniformly buried east-west, with the head to the west. One freed slave explained that the dead should not have to turn around when Gabriel blows his trumpet in the eastern sunrise. Others have suggested they were buried facing Africa.

Even where the slaves were buried seems similar. All seem to represent marginal property — land which the planter wasn't likely to use for other purposes. The burial spots have been described as "ragged patches of live-oak and palmetto and brier tangle which throughout the Islands are a sign of graves within, — graves scattered without symmetry, and often without headstones or head-boards, or sticks . . ." A more recent researcher, Elsie Clews Parsons, observes that the African-American cemeteries were:

hidden away in remote spots among trees and underbrush. In the middle of some fields are islands of large trees the owners preferred not to make arable, because of the exhaustive work of clearing it. Old graves are now in among these trees and surrounding underbrush.

Frances Anne Kemble reported that while an enclosure was erected around the graves of several white laborers buried on Butler Island, the graves of the African-American slaves were trampled on by the plantation cattle.

A black cemetery in the South Carolina up country was described by John William DeForest shortly after the Civil War. He commented that while a few marble and brick headstones were present, most were "wooden slabs, all grimed and mouldering with the dampness of the forest. . . ." At the time, some of the wooden slabs had painted names and dates. The paint likely flaked off only shortly before the wood itself rotted away.



Example of a stone marker for Albert Doctor, born a slave, in Georgetown County, South Carolina.

Graves were marked in a variety of ways besides wood or stone slabs. Sometimes unusual carved wooden staffs, thought perhaps to represent religious motifs or effigies, were used. Some graves were marked using plants, such as cedars or yuccas, and anthropologists have suggested this tradition may reflect an African belief in the living spirit. This tradition can be traced at least to Haiti, where blacks, probably mixing Christian religion with African beliefs, explain that, "trees live after, death is not the end." Yuccas and other "prickly" plants may also have been used "to keep the spirits" in the cemetery. Other graves were marked with

pieces of iron pipe, railroad iron, or any other convenient object.

At times shells were used to mark the grave. One anthropologist in the early 1890s remarked that "nearly every grave has bordering or thrown upon it a few bleached sea-shells of a dozen different kinds." This practice has been traced back to at least the BaKongo belief that the sea shell encloses the soul's immortal presence. There was a prayer to the mbamba sea shell:

As strong as your house you shall keep my life for me. When you leave for the sea, take me along, that I may live forever with you.

Even into the twentieth century some Gullah explained the use of shells on graves



African-American graves on Springfield Plantation, now part of Brookgreen Gardens, in January 1931. Courtesy of Brookgreen Gardens Archives, Murrells Inlet, South Carolina.





An African-American cemetery from the Beaufort County, South Carolina area in the early twentieth century showing an array of grave goods — including bottles, plates, and bowls. Also present are a range of grave markers — stone monuments, wooden slabs, wooden stakes or posts, and even some ornamental plants.



as representing the sea:

The sea brought us, the sea shall take us back. So the shells  
upon our graves stand for water, the means of glory and the  
land of demise.

Probably the most commonly known African-American grave marking practice was the use of "offerings" on top of the grave. One of most detailed discussions of this practice is provided by John Michael Vlach, in *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*. He notes that the objects found on graves included not only pottery, but also "cups, saucers, bowls, clocks, salt and pepper shakers, medicine bottles, spoons, pitchers, oyster shells, conch shells, white pebbles, toys, dolls' heads, bric-a-brac statues, light bulbs, tureens, flashlights, soap dishes, false teeth, syrup jugs, spectacles, cigar boxes, piggy banks, gun locks, razors, knives, tomato cans, flower pots, marbles, bits of plaster, [and] toilet tanks."

This practice may be traced back to Africa, where a wide variety of items used by the dead individual were placed on the grave. Some believe that the symbolism is that of the body destroyed by death. Others trace the practice to a belief that the practice guards the grave, preventing the dead from returning to direct the lives of those still living. Some suggest the symbolism of the various items is particularly important — with reflective items, like glass and mirrors, used to show the "mirror image" of this life compared to the next. Other items focus on water as symbolism, both as representing how African Americans were transported as slaves and also as representing how they will be transported into the next world. A number of the grave goods are also "killed," or deliberately damaged. This is to perhaps help the item to stay in the afterlife with its owner.

In truth, we really don't know the meaning of this practice, although it was recognized by whites at least as far back as Dubois Hayward's day, when he wrote about the practice in the short story, "Half Pint Flask."

Writing in the first quarter of the twentieth century, Elsie Clews Parsons commented that African-American cemeteries did not typically preserve family groupings. Although generations of related kin would be buried at the same graveyard, the tie was to the location, not to a particular 3 by 6 foot piece of ground. The Bennett Papers, in the South Carolina Historical Society, reveal several stories of African-Americans wanting to be buried in very specific graveyards, although specific plots are never of concern. In one case a black was reported to have specifically warned his friends, "don't bury me in strange ground; I won't stay buried if you do. Bury me where I say." A somewhat similar account is provided in an article from the *Journal of American Folklore*. An article recounts the legend of a slave who begged not to be buried in the graveyard of his mean-spirited master. When his dying request was ignored, he found retribution by haunting the plantation.

Creel offers one of the more detailed explorations of African-American beliefs toward death during slavery, noting that many of the spirituals provide rare glimpses of the slaves' belief systems. One, in particular, was especially telling:

I wonder where my mudder gone;  
Sing, O graveyard!  
Graveyard ought to know me;  
Ring, Jerusalem!  
Grass grow in de graveyard;  
Sing, O Graveyard!  
Graveyard ought to know me;  
Ring, Jerusalem!

Creel observes that while the anguish is clearly conveyed by this song, so too is a sense of hope — most clearly revealed in the line, "Grass grow in de graveyard." She relates this to the BaKongo tradition that although there is certainly death, there is also life and rebirth. She wonders if the line, "Graveyard ought to know me" is a reference to the many trips slaves took there burying their friends or family, or whether it might have a deeper meaning, perhaps referring to the slaves' previous journeys to the world of the dead as "seekers."

### *Archaeology and African-American Cemeteries*

Relatively few African-American cemeteries have been explored archaeologically. There are several reasons for this — many cemeteries dating from the eighteenth or nineteenth century plantations are just never found, others are removed by undertakers without the benefit of archaeological study, and a very few are simply preserved or set aside.

One of the very best studied African-American graveyards in the South Carolina low country was exposed just outside Charleston during the construction of a motel.<sup>2</sup> No archaeological survey had been required, so we aren't sure what above ground indications there might have been. Fortunately, however, the heavy equipment operators did the right thing and stopped when bone was first noticed. Archaeologists and forensic anthropologists were called in and the remains were excavated for study and reburial. While only 36 skeletons were identified, all dated from about 1840 through 1870.

This study helped confirm some of what we know historically and added

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<sup>2</sup> This cemetery is known to archaeologists as 38CH778. Unfortunately, its real name has never been discovered, nor do we know much about its history. In the twentieth century it was likely situated on what was known as the Bayview Plantation, while earlier it was apparently part of the Hunt Plantation. The lack of traditional historical information is typical of African-American cemeteries which began during the antebellum.

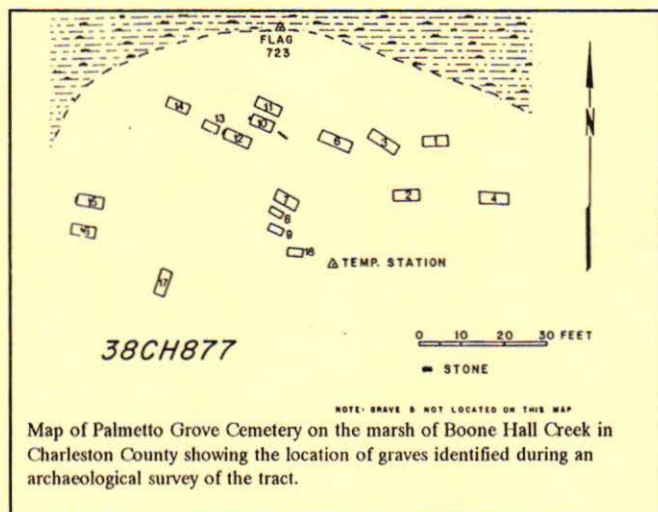
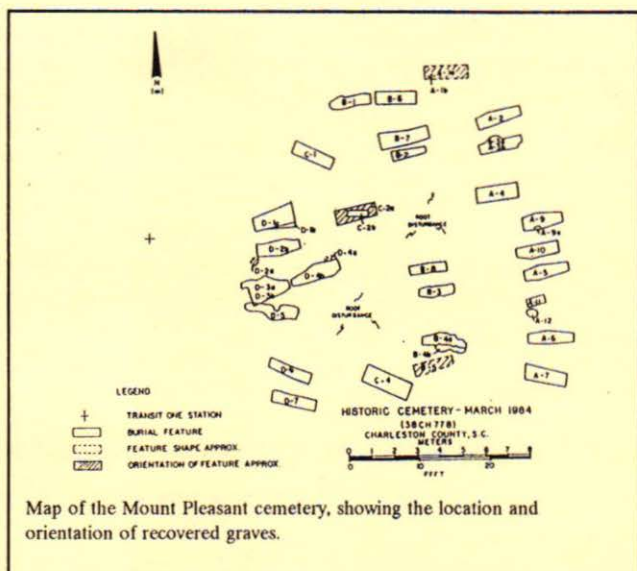


much to our knowledge of African-American diet and disease. The average age at death for males was a young 35 years, while females lived a few years longer, to about 40. There was evidence among both the males and females of severe dietary stress during childhood, especially during the period from about 2 to 4 years old. Anemia was a

significant problem, being found in about 80% of the subadults and over a third of the adults. There were indications of infections in many of the individuals buried at this graveyard. There was likewise clear skeletal evidence of the demanding physical labor these people were forced to undertake. The shoulder and hips were especially affected by degenerative changes. Perhaps most surprisingly, chemical studies also revealed that these African-American slaves were exposed to

very high levels of lead in their diet, probably from the ceramics from which they ate.

This cemetery also helped us better understand burial practices among slaves and freedmen shortly after the Civil War. For example, the burials were typically fairly



shallow, with none being deeper than perhaps four feet. There was evidence of both coffins and bodies wrapped in shrouds. A large number of coffin hardware items were recovered, including handles, thumbscrews, escutcheons, studs, coffin screws and tacks, and several coffin plates. In fact, at least seven silvered coffin plates were found. Curiously, there is one account of African-American folklore in the Bennett Papers which explains that a "silver coffin-plate with the name of the deceased is believed to confine the spirit of the dead to its proper resting-place to constrain it to remain within the coffin."

Many other graveyards, such as the one at Palmetto Grove, have simply had the identifiable grave depressions mapped, and have been left in place. Since the burials are not removed we don't have the opportunity to learn more about the people who were buried there, but the site is preserved, being set aside. Often, this may be preferable to the community.

### ***The Differences Between African-American and Euro-American Cemeteries***

This brief overview of African-American cemeteries has revealed that there are a lot of differences between traditional African-American and traditional Euro-American cemeteries. Some of these differences can be traced to different religious beliefs. Some are probably only the by-product of one group being enslaved by the other.

The location of African-American graveyards in marginal areas, for example, was probably the result of blacks being enslaved. Not only did owners not want to lose valuable land to slaves, but controlling even where the dead might be buried was yet another example of the power plantation owners had over their slaves.

The use of plants to mark graves, however, is likely related to African antecedents. Marking the graves was important, regardless of what was used, at least for the current generation. The predominance of temporary items — plants and wood planks, for example — suggests that it wasn't particularly important for future generations to know the location of any specific grave.

In fact, the use of temporary markers helps, in its own way, to ensure that the cemetery is always available to those who want to be buried with their kin. As one modern black man explained, "there is always room for one more person." This, of course, sounds impossible to many whites, who see cemeteries in terms of a finite number of square feet. But this is simply not how African-Americans have traditionally viewed graveyards.

Cynthia Conner, an archaeologist who studied South Carolina low country plantation cemeteries, remarked that the very ideology of black and white graveyards is fundamentally different. In white cemeteries, the:



idealization of death is paramount. The romanticization of the landscape is intended to create heaven on earth in the cemetery grounds and deny the blunt reality of death. This is initially accomplished through placement [of the white cemetery] in a favorable location. . . . The setting is further enhanced through the simultaneous control of unrestrained natural growth and the use of a few select trees such as live oaks to create a parklike atmosphere. . . . The black cemetery, on the other hand, is not directed toward a parklike environment, or, I believe, the denial of death.

African-American cemeteries have grave depressions and mounded graves. There is no attempt to make grass grow over the graves or create special vegetation. Trees, typically, are neither encouraged nor discouraged. Cemeteries, as previously mentioned, appear "neglected" or even "abandoned" in contrast to the neat, tidy rows of a white cemetery. The mapping of African-American cemeteries like the two examples previously discussed reveals the somewhat random placement of graves.

Old African-American cemeteries are rarely documented. They infrequently appear on maps and almost never are shown on historic plats. It just wasn't important to most plantation owners to show the location of "slave burial grounds." These graveyards, used for generations by tradition, are rarely delineated by deeds or other legal instruments.

These cemeteries, however, are often well-known to the rural African-American communities. Where traditional historical and documentary sources fail to provide information, often oral history can provide impressive details on the size, number of individuals buried, general locations of different family plots, and old fence lines. Too often, however, these local sources are not sought out.

### *Preservation of African-American Cemeteries*

The differences between "white" and "black" graveyards often result in serious damage, loss, or legal entanglements.

Profit margins may encourage "underestimating" the size of the graveyard, or even ignoring its existence altogether. At least one court case in South Carolina has focused on the size of an African-American cemetery. In another situation a property owner apparently moved all of the grave markers to make it more difficult to identify the cemetery.

Cemeteries may not be recognized until construction has already begun. This was the case in the Mount Pleasant cemetery, although here the construction crews acknowledged their responsibility and immediately stopped as soon as the

cemetery was found.

Efforts may be made to have the cemetery declared "abandoned," allowing its more convenient and expeditious removal. The legal definition of "abandoned," however, fails to understand the nature of African-American cemeteries, their use, and their importance to the community.

Although South Carolina has laws protecting cemeteries<sup>3</sup>, they are unevenly applied. Many law enforcement agencies and coroners don't seem to have the manpower or enthusiasm to aggressively protect cemeteries. Further, the expense of legal action is often great and may be too late to save fragile resources.

The King Cemetery in southern Charleston County provides an excellent case study. Situated on the edge of a proposed borrow pit and possible land fill, the cemetery was at first unrecognized by County government. Only when the cemetery was recognized archaeologically and recorded as a potentially significant archaeological site was the impact of the proposed project on the graves taken into account. Although documentary history was not found, the general location of the cemetery was shown on maps and one of the three individuals identified by stones in the cemetery could be found through death certificate records.<sup>4</sup> This record not only identified the individual as African-American, but also revealed the name of the graveyard as the "King Cemetery."

Unfortunately, the views and information of the local community were never sought by the County — which missed an exceptional opportunity to involve the African-American population in the decision-making process. The County declared the cemetery "abandoned," failing to recognize that the local community was well aware of its presence and still had strong ties to the property. An article in the Charleston, South Carolina *Coastal Times* found that a local resident, Sarah Middleton, who is nearly 100 years old, vividly remembers walking in funeral processions to the King Cemetery. Other members of the local black community are equally aware of the cemetery and could point out its boundaries, where the fence used to stand, and even where the gates were which allowed access to the graveyard.

While archaeological techniques may be used to identify cemetery

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<sup>3</sup> The South Carolina Code of Laws, Section 16-17-600 et seq. makes it a felony to destroy, damage or desecrate human remains. This same law also makes it a misdemeanor to vandalize, obliterate, or desecrate a graveyard; vandalize, injure or remove a gravestone or other marker; or destroy, injure, or remove fencing or vegetation on or around "a repository for human remains."

<sup>4</sup> Death certificates were required in South Carolina beginning in 1915 and are restricted from the public for 50 years. The South Carolina Department of Archives and History has the certificates from 1915 to the year before the fifty year restriction. More information is available from a S.C. Department of Archives and History publication entitled, *Vital Records* by Sharmila Bhatia.



locations and the number of graves, this approach is not always appropriate. Like any other technique it can vary from leaving virtually no impact on the graveyard to highly intrusive.

Methods which leave little or no impact include searching for grave depressions, noting the location and distribution of grave goods and plantings, using a metal or fiberglass probe to help identify grave shafts, using a soil auger to study soil profiles, and using soil compaction testers, also known as penetrometers, to help gauge where graves may have been dug.

Slightly more intrusive is the use of limited hand excavation, cleaning small areas in the search for grave stains. This may be necessary to confirm the presence or absence of graves in particular areas. Such work can usually be done in a way that the character of the graveyard is not altered and that restoration is simple.

Some techniques, however, may cause extensive damage to the surrounding area. Examples of this include the large-scale stripping of soil with bulldozers to identify graves over a broad area. Most often used when the cemetery is to be completely moved, the removal of vegetation and the drastic alteration of landscape may be seen by many as damaging the sacredness of the spot. Others may legitimately see such stripping as unnecessary, especially when the cemetery is not to be moved, given the extensive oral history which is usually readily available.

The technique or techniques used should be approved by those who have ties with the cemetery. While it is appropriate for the archaeologist to offer suggestions, it is essential that the wishes and feelings of the descendants always be the guiding factor in cemetery research.

### ***Actions You Can Take to Help Preserve African-American Graveyards***

Perhaps the single most important step you can take to preserve and protect African-American graveyards is to keep their history alive. If you are an older member of the community and know of such a cemetery, tell your children and grandchildren about it. If you can, take them out to the property and show them what you know about the graveyard. If you are a young member of the community, ask questions — Where were the graveyards? What families were buried there? How many people were buried there? What were the cemeteries called?

By keeping the history of these cemeteries alive you are helping to make sure that others can learn about this heritage. Try to make contact with the property owner and ask them for the right to visit the cemetery. Help them

understand that you feel as strongly as about this graveyard as they do about where their relatives are buried. Work to find compromises which allow access while respecting the rights of the property owner.

You must also, however, be alert to dangers. You must be aware of survey parties flagging the property, efforts to post the property, changes in ownership, the erection of new fences or the locking of gates, and the appearance of heavy equipment. While there are unscrupulous individuals, many people are simply not aware that a cemetery exists on their property.

If you feel that a cemetery is about to be damaged or destroyed, contact the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology at 803/777-8170. This agency coordinates with law enforcement, medical examiners, and coroners and may be able to provide you with additional guidance and assistance. By contacting the Site Files Manager at this agency you will be able to officially record any cemetery you know of. The site file manager will help you complete the necessary paper work and assign the site a permanent number. Although this doesn't guarantee protection, it will help ensure that land planners are aware of its location.

You may also contact us here at Chicora Foundation and we will help put you in contact with others that may be able to provide assistance.

### *For More Information*

If you would like more information about African-American graveyards and cemeteries or about the preservation of these resources, look for these books and articles at your local library or ask your librarian to get them for you through Inter-library Loan.

Creel, Margaret Washington. 1988. *"A Peculiar People." Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs.* New York: New York University Press.

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- Writers' Program. 1986. *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*. Athens: University of Georgia Press (originally published 1940).

### ***Important Resources***

For additional information on the laws protecting African-American cemeteries and for assistance in recording graveyards as archaeological sites:

Deputy State Archaeologist/Site Files Manager  
South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology  
University of South Carolina  
Columbia, SC 29208  
803/777-8170

For information on preservation strategies and for technical expertise on stone conservation:

Ms. Lynette Strangstad  
Stone Faces  
PO Box 21090  
Charleston, SC 29413  
803/762-6025

For additional information on preservation efforts and techniques:

Chicora Foundation, Inc.  
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Chicora began as a small, not-for-profit, public foundation more than a decade ago, with the lofty mission of preserving the archaeological, historical, and cultural resources of the Carolinas.

Today that means a wealth of innovative programs.

Like our school programs explaining Black and Native American history to children. "How-to" workshops for adults interested in preserving quilts, photos, and family Bibles. And our collaborative archaeology projects with leading business partners such as Kiawah Resort Associates, International Paper, Westvaco Development Corporation, and The Beach Company to explore both the history and prehistory of our region.

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